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Guidelines and Strategies for Conducting Meetings

JOAN NORTH

The complexities of curriculum development at Broward Community College in Fort Lauderdale—an enterprise in which six subcommittees are active—have brought forth this “unofficial footnote” to what we assume is an otherwise official report.

“According to my ‘logical’ calculations, we are now ready to have a group reaction to the individual reactions to the interim reports so that the original committees can prepare final reports based on the group reactions to the individual reactions to the interim reports to give to the new committees so that they can make new interim reports based on the old final reports by the original committees based on the group reactions to the individual reactions to the interim reports. . . .”¹

The phrase, “We’ve got to stop meeting like this” is taking on new meaning in higher education as colleges and universities experiencing tighter budgets search for new ways to increase productivity, reduce costs and, as always, raise morale. Traditional collegial governance has in common with newer unionized approaches to decision making one especially notable characteristic—the need for meetings and committees. A conservative estimate of a person spending five hours in meetings per week would add up to 10,400 meeting hours in that person’s lifetime. Higher education is probably responsible for more than its share of the 11 million meetings occurring each day in the United States (Doyle and Straus, 1976). It is not rare (unfortunately) for a medium sized university to accumulate from all its hierarchical levels as many as 65 committees a year.

¹ An entry in the “Marginalia” column of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 21, 1978.

Since time spent in committees and office meetings is time *not* spent on teaching, advising, researching, raising funds or other primary responsibilities, it has become imperative to examine the number of purposes of committees and to make quantum leaps in the sophistication of group decision making within them. Thus, this article is devoted to illuminating ways to make meetings in general—and committee meetings in particular—useful, more efficient, and even pleasurable.

Structuring Committees and Meetings According to Purpose

Probably one of the more pervasive and pernicious handicaps of a committee is confusion or uncertainty about its purpose. All too frequently, a whole year passes while members struggle with “what are we supposed to do?” It is probable that a committee which does not know its purpose will produce little else but frustration.

Several well-documented reasons for working in groups attest to the fact that not all meetings need to be wasteful. Greater creativity and ownership of issues are two pluses for group deliberation; also, information sharing in groups can be more efficient than other communication modes. Thus, there appear to be *three major valid purposes* for calling people together in committees or meetings: 1) to solve problems; 2) to make “administrative” decisions; and 3) to inform/coordinate/seek information. Understanding the meeting’s purpose will guide members as to how to proceed with the committee’s business. Form should follow function.

Problem Solving Committee/Meeting. Meetings or committees of this type begin with a problem and end with proposed actions to relieve the problem. Examples of committees common to most campuses which could fit this category are committees on Retention, Curriculum Review and Academic or Student Affairs.

Although knowledge about problem-solving techniques abounds, it is seldom found operating in meetings designed to solve problems. In order to be effective, problem solving groups must adopt some systematic process to wade through their work and adhere to it throughout the deliberation.

The following steps may provide a useful model, although others are equally useful; the point is to use *some* model.

1. Meetings 1–3—Define the problem.²

² Complex problems can be made more manageable by: 1) listing different as-

2. Meetings 4–5—Collect all relevant information and obtain agreement on its nature.
3. Meeting 6—Generate alternative solutions.³
4. Meeting 7—Examine and choose solutions.⁴
5. Meeting 8—Anticipate problems and revise as necessary. Try using “Force Field Analysis.”⁵

“Administrative” Decision Committee/Meeting. Many colleges rely on committees for a number of decisions or recommendations regarding the operation of the college, e.g., special admissions decisions, decisions about computer purchases, awarding scholarships or assigning faculty committees. Many offices, departmental or “cabinet” meetings fit into this type.

How does a group go about making decisions? Usually very unsystematically. One systematic approach is listed below:

1. Meeting 1—Establish objectives and outline results to be achieved. List criteria that any alternative should meet.
2. Meeting 2—Classify objectives and determine relative importance of different results; identify what *must* be accomplished versus what is desired but not necessary.
3. Meeting 3—Compare alternatives.
4. Meeting 4—Consider diverse consequences: anticipate negative side of an alternative; identify risks.
5. Meeting 5—Make choices: put benefits and risks of each alternative in perspective and reach a conclusion.

There are other approaches which may be appropriate, but the point is for the group to have in mind a clear idea of the *steps to be taken to reach the decision*.

Information Sharing Committees/Meetings. Although not as much is written about meetings whose purposes are communication instead of problem solving or decision making, this type of group exists abundantly on most campuses. Many staff meetings, faculty meetings, advisory councils and some committee meetings have this

pects of the problem; 2) combining similar aspects; 3) determining if further information is necessary; and 4) deciding which sub-problem to deal with first.

³ See the section on decision-making tools in this article for ways to create new ideas.

⁴ Some techniques and hints for weighing and choosing solutions are: 1) discuss only those on which there is agreement; 2) cross off those on which there is substantial disagreement; 3) differentiate between multiple and alternative solutions; and 4) choose and use criteria by which to judge solutions (Merry and Allerhand, 1977). Also see section on decision making tools in this article.

⁵ See Merry and Allerhand (1977) for details concerning “Force Field Analysis.”

purpose. It is important for members to understand their purpose and not to expect actions when none are intended.

This type of committee/meeting can be used to communicate information to a group, to get group feedback, or to exchange information among the group. Again, knowing *which* of these subpurposes is intended is important for group functioning and morale.

Procedures for this type of committee/meeting include:

1. Identifying pertinent information to be communicated;
2. Identifying who needs to hear it; and
3. Communicating it.

Using Planning to Produce Effective Committees

Committees fail to produce results because, among other reasons:

1. They act without clarifying what they are supposed to do;
2. They *never* figure out what they're supposed to do;
3. They don't see their own progress; and/or
4. They don't talk about *how* they will operate together.

In order to counteract these failure-producing situations, it is recommended that a big block of time be devoted early in the committee's life to planning what the committee will do and how and when. Dealing with the following sequence of questions will cover the most important issues:

General:

1. What is the purpose of this committee—problem solving, decision making, information sharing?
2. What specific charge do we have?
3. What will we do? Collect information? Discuss? Convince other people?
4. What sequence will follow? (See earlier section for suggestions about sequences of action for various types of committees.)
5. When? Can we establish deadlines, a calendar of actions?
6. How will we operate internally?

Content:

7. How will we communicate with others (and who are they?)—minutes, oral progress reports, lists of questions under discussion, final report?
8. How will we organize ourselves—use subcommittees, individual assignments, full group work?
9. When and where will we meet?
10. How and when will we celebrate completion of steps?

Decisions:

11. What will constitute a group decision? Will we use
 - A. consensus?
 - B. majority vote?
 - C. general understanding?
12. What decision making tools will we use? (See the last section in this article.)

Process:

13. What are the process issues?
14. How will we monitor process issues?
15. How will we evaluate how well we handled process issues?

After all or most of these questions are answered, the committee is ready to go to work.

Committee Effectiveness—Results

There are two benchmarks for determining the effectiveness of meetings or committees: the extent to which results were achieved, and the degree to which members feel positive about their participation (Doyle and Straus, 1976). Good results are no less difficult to achieve than the latter process goal. The following suggestions will contribute to better results:

1. Appoint a "chairperson for results" (sometimes called the traffic cop) who is responsible for recording the progress of the group on a conveniently located blackboard or flip chart; for keeping track of and reviewing decisions or assignments made; for helping the group clearly separate the meeting's content (the what) from the methodology to deal with the content (the how); for obtaining the group's agreement on the what and the how, e.g., "we will discuss the *problem of communication* on campus by *brainstorming* possible causes;" keeping the group on track for both the what and the how; and for helping the group stick to one item at a time. (See Doyle and Straus [1976], chapter 7: "How to Be a Good Recorder".)
2. Think of ways to get work done without the whole group meeting every time. Consider subcommittees and making assignments to individuals.
3. Regardless of which type of committee/meeting is being held, be very clear about when the group is:
 - A. brainstorming ideas,
 - B. making proposals and evaluating them, or
 - C. making decisions.
4. Separate *idea generation* from *idea evaluation*.
5. Start on time and end on time.

6. Allocate time to each topic on the agenda proportional to its relative importance.
7. Go over the agenda to assure agreement on it, and then *STICK TO IT*.
8. Handle important items first.
9. Use an evaluation checklist and occasionally review the meeting according to the following questions:
 - A. Was the meeting's purpose clear?
 - B. Was the purpose achieved?
 - C. Was the agenda sent prior to the meeting?
 - D. Were assignments and deadlines fixed?
 - E. What percent of the time was not effectively used? Why?
10. It also may be wise to open some of the meetings to non-members for specific input or for political reasons. Try the "fish bowl" technique for large numbers.
11. Make adequate preparations for the meeting.
 - A. Distribute an agenda, or better yet, a statement of *results* desired from an upcoming meeting.
 - B. If visual aids will help clarity, have them prepared.
 - C. Have a flip chart or at least a blackboard in the room.
12. Vary the time and space of the meetings.
 - A. Use irregular time periods for meetings; talk expands to fill the time allotted. Try a 6-hour meeting in the beginning and 15-minute meetings occasionally.
 - B. Try conducting one meeting by mail.
 - C. Use a semicircle of chairs facing the flip chart or blackboard on which results or decision-making processes are being recorded.
 - D. Have some meetings at someone's home.
 - E. Try a "stand up" meeting if time is important.

Committee Effectiveness—Process

The process or psychological aspect of committees may be a thorny issue, because this aspect highlights the people issues contained within the whole college. Committees are microcosms of the whole. Examining how people deal with each other, how conflict is handled (or ignored) or how much listening occurs in meetings can give the viewer a fairly accurate picture of how the college operates. This aspect also reveals inevitable differences in personality, in operating styles and in motives. For example, persons with higher power motivation thrive on conflict and competition while those with high affiliation motivation tend to avoid these situations, choosing collaboration or harmony instead (Kolb, 1974).

If a committee or meeting is successful in achieving results, but

at the expense of the members' feelings, complete success has not occurred. Individuals who feel "run over" during meetings not only increase low morale in the organization, but will also be reluctant to contribute to future meetings.

Actions which can be taken to handle the *people* part of committees include:

1. Have the group appoint a chairperson for process who is responsible for paying special attention to what's happening to people in the meetings, whether listening is occurring, how conflict is being handled, and so forth. This person should make appropriate observations and suggestions to the group. (See Doyle and Straus [1976], chapter 6: "How to Be a Good Facilitator".)
2. In an early meeting, a general discussion of progress issues should be encouraged. Materials from the source page in Doyle and Straus may be helpful.
3. Make sure participation is broad by bringing others into discussions and probing (protecting) minority views.
4. Check for accurate communication among members" "Are you saying? . . . How did you hear that? . . . Will you restate that for me?"
5. Summarize where the discussion stands.
6. Help handle the rambler: "Why don't we hear from some other people now? . . . I know that issue is very important to you, so perhaps we should put it on next week's agenda . . . That's an interesting idea; why don't you and I discuss it after the meeting?"
7. If it appears that people are not listening to each other, establish a temporary rule that anyone who speaks must first repeat what was said last to the satisfaction of the previous speaker.
8. Much time and good will is wasted in meetings (and elsewhere) over arguments about which "solution" is best.⁶ An excellent process to facilitate such a situation is:
 - A. Ask each party what they hope to achieve by their solution.
 - B. Write the responses at the top of a flip chart. This redirects attention from the argument to the problem.
 - C. Ask the parties to brainstorm solutions to the problems written on the sheet.
9. There are three committee/meeting members to watch for, and the facilitator should help them understand and communicate

⁶ "Many conflicts may grow out of arguments about the relative merits of two obvious solutions; the parties involved do not create a new alternative that would satisfy the needs of both. When this happens, it is also common for the focus of the discussion to be broadened from a specific disagreement to a generalized hostility" (Fillee, 1975).

with each other: Friendly Helper, Tough Battler and Logical Thinker (Kolb *et al.*, 1974). Their attributes and concerns are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1
COMMITTEE/MEETING STEREOTYPE MEMBERS

1. Friendly Helper	2. Tough Battler	3. Logical Thinker
A world of mutual love, affection, tenderness, sympathy	A world of conflict, fight, power, assertiveness	A world of understanding, logic, systems, knowledge
<i>Task Maintenance Behavior</i>		
Harmonizing	Initiating	Gathering information
Compromising	Coordinating	Clarifying ideas and words
Gatekeeping by concern	Pressing for results	Systematizing
Encouraging	Pressing for consensus	Procedures
Expressing warmth	Exploring differences	Evaluating the logic of proposals
	Gatekeeping by command	
<i>Constructs Used in Evaluating Others</i>		
Who is warm and who is hostile?	Who is strong and who is weak?	Who is bright and who is stupid?
Who helps and who hurts others?	Who is winning and who is losing?	Who is accurate and who is inaccurate?
		Who thinks clearly and who is fuzzy?
<i>Methods of Influence</i>		
Appeasing	Giving orders	Appealing to rules and regulations
Appealing to pity	Offering challenges	Appealing to logic
	Threatening	Referring to "facts" and overwhelming knowledge
<i>Personal Threats</i>		
That he will not be loved	That he will lose his ability to fight (power)	That his world is not ordered
That he will be overwhelmed by feelings of hostility	That he will become "soft" and "sentimental"	That he will be overwhelmed by love or hate

SOURCE: Kolb *et al.*, 1974.

10. Operate by consensus whenever possible. This means that *every* member agrees or at least is more satisfied with this decision than alternative ones. Silence does *not* mean agreement. (See Doyle & Straus [1976], pp. 10 ff.)
11. Encourage and keep a handle on disagreement during discussions. Remember that it's not always obvious if a person is de-

fending an idea or an ego. Eventually move to points of agreement. Remember, the purpose is not winning a point, but finding a solution.

12. Have fun! Celebrate the completion of steps or tasks. Celebrate birthdays. Begin meetings with riddles. Provide college-wide recognition for the members' work. Provide coffee and cookies.

Decision Making Tools

There are a variety of tools and techniques available to help groups come to decisions or common conclusions, the most widely known being voting on issues. This section will explore some less widely known but effective tools.

1. Tools to help a group come to agreement concerning the priority of items (problems, solutions, steps, etc.):

- A. Nominal Group Process⁷

Step 1: State the issue at hand and ask the group to write down their responses in phrases.

Step 2: Record the ideas, one idea per person at a time, on a large flip chart. No conversation, discussion or evaluation of the ideas should be allowed during this step.

Step 3: Have the group discuss the ideas one at a time.

Step 4: Ask the group members to individually select 5 ideas from the list and write each one on a separate 3 x 5 card, rank order their cards, and record the results.

Step 5: Allow discussion on the vote.

Step 6: Re-vote and tally.

- B. Delphi Technique⁸

This technique does not require the committee to meet throughout the process. A questionnaire is developed and given to members; it concerns their opinions about the issues at hand, problems, solutions, and so forth. A summary of responses is developed and returned to individuals, who then revise their own responses based on the summary. Several iterations may occur and meetings may be called for discussion.

- C. Priority Matrix⁹

This technique is similar to those of a nominal group process, and an example is given in Figure 1.

Step 1: Group writes 2-3 problems, solutions or ideas.

Step 2: Chair lists all responses on newsprint.

⁷ See Delbecq (1975) for details.

⁸ See Delbecq (1975) for details.

⁹ See Merry and Allerhand (1977) for details.

which lists proposals down one side and criteria across the top.

- Step 3: Have the group as a whole rate each proposal by each criteria; high-medium-low will suffice. Record the ratings.
- Step 4: Ask the group if there are any criteria which carry more weight; if so, note on the sheet.
- Step 5: The group indicates which proposals are ranked highest by most criteria, and achieves consensus.
- Step 6: Members make suggestions about how to reduce weak points of some of the "good" proposals.

FIGURE 2
Criteria Matrix Sheet

	Contribution	Money	Manpower	Commitment	Resistance	Etc.
Proposal A						
Proposal B						
Proposal C						
Proposal D						
Proposal E						
Proposal F						
Etc.						

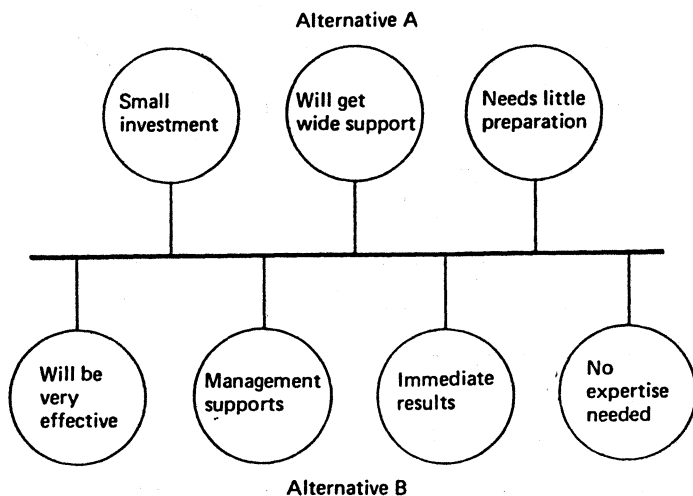
Source: Merry and Allerhand, 1977.

- 2. A tool to help a group choose between two alternative solutions.¹¹
 - Step 1: Prepare newsprint by drawing a line across the page and writing one solution at the top and the other at the bottom.
 - Step 2: Ask members to give their reasons for supporting either alternative, without discussion or explanation, while you write the reason in a few words on the side of the alternative it supports. The resulting diagram will be similar to the example given in Figure 3.
 - Step 3: Discussion

¹¹ See Merry and Allerhand (1977) for details.

- Step 4:** Each member allocates 10 points among the considerations supporting each alternative: ten points for *each* alternative, using the points to indicate the amount of support it gives to the alternative. This step helps people see the rationale, even for alternatives they do not support.
- Step 5:** After tallying the results, re-draw the figure on a new piece of paper, but include only the 2 or 3 highest ranked criteria on each side.
- Step 6:** Each member divides 10 points among the remaining criteria on *either* side of the sheet.
- Step 7:** Tally the results and you should find a winner. Spend more time improving the chosen solution.

FIGURE 3
Alternative Choice Example



Source: Merry and Allerhand, 1977.

3. Tools to help a group generate new and creative ideas about a problem, a solution or a decision.

A. Brainstorming.

- Step 1:** Explain the rules of brainstorming and prepare a sheet of newsprint.
- Step 2:** For 5 minutes, allow anyone to give ideas which you write on the paper. No evaluation of the ideas is allowed to be given by anyone. Stress creativity and unusual ideas. Encourage people to piggyback on each other's ideas.

B. Modified Delphi.

Allow 5 minutes, during which each member sequentially adds an idea to the newsprint.

C. Divergent thinking.

Each member chooses at random a word on a page in a book. Each member then generates as many ideas as possible thinking of that word and the issue at hand.

Summary

Woven throughout this article are four pillar points. First, know the purpose of the meeting or committee and structure the deliberation into sequential steps which match the purpose. Second, separate content issues from process issues. Third, assure that meetings have three officers, each responsible for different aspects of the meeting: chair, results person and process person. Finally, combat routine and boredom by being imaginative in the use of decision tools, location and times.

If these four guidelines are followed, and if certain of the strategies discussed above are utilized as appropriate, the time spent in meetings will not necessarily be more fun. However, there will be less wasted time, less resentment about committee assignments, and more accomplishments. That almost sounds like fun.

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